
Book Reviews

'Circa 1492': What the Iberian Renaissance gave to the Americas

Part II, by Nora Hamerman

Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration

Edited by Jay A. Levenson

National Gallery of Art, Washington; Yale University Press, New Haven, 1991

672 pages, hardbound, \$59.95; paperbound, \$45.

Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries

Introduction by Octavio Paz

The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Bulfinch Press, New York, 1990

712 pages, hardbound, \$75; paperbound, \$39.95

In the first article of this series, reviewing "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration," which is on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington until Jan. 12, 1992, I discussed the core of this huge exhibition: the galleries which celebrate the Italian Renaissance and the spread of the Christian humanist, scientific world outlook through Europe, culminating in the work of the two greatest living artists of 1492, Italy's Leonardo da Vinci and Germany's Albrecht Dürer. This second article will focus on the Iberian Peninsula, including the many facets of the Renaissance which were exported to the Spanish and Portuguese dominions as the crucial part of evangelizing the New World.

How important all this is in order to understand our history as Americans, and the obviously timely issue of the role of the Americas in resolving today's moral crisis, comes best into focus by considering a second "mega-exhibition" now at the Los Angeles County Museum, called "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries." Like "Circa 1492," the show was mounted for the Quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's transatlantic voyage of 1492. While the Washington show has only one venue, "Mexico" is completing a tour that began in 1990 in New York. "Circa 1492" takes a horizontal slice

of the greatest art in the world in the 50 years around 1492; "Mexico" tries to encompass the entire esthetic history of a single country. Both shows include much "art" from the pre-Columbian American societies, culminating in the dreadful Aztecs, and juxtapose this with the art produced in Europe, or in the case of the Los Angeles show, produced in America but from European Christian cultural roots.

I encourage anyone in the Los Angeles or Washington area to see these exhibitions first hand, as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I also recommend both catalogues, as full of useful information, although far too heavy to lug around inside the shows. In the next article in this series, I shall discuss why, by the time Columbus arrived, the societies in the Americas had lost the moral fitness to survive. This is not the conclusion advanced by the organizers of either exhibit, but the objects they present and the information they provide, I believe, make it inescapable.

Portugal's pioneering navigation

The Washington show opens with a visual Prologue, consisting of the great "Catalan Atlas" of ca. 1375 by the Jewish cartographer Abraham Cresques, who played a key role in the century of discovery. The Atlas combines an encyclopedia of cosmology and geography, astronomical chart, and map of the then-known world based on the "portolan" maps made by navigators. It is followed by rich textiles and vessels from the Orient, near and far, which had come into Europe in the 1300s and 1400s. Next, four galleries survey Portugal and Spain ca. 1492, a fifth takes us to west Africa, and a sixth to the exotic East, namely the Ottoman and Mameluke Islamic empires.

The Portuguese sailors were the first to seek a new route to the Indies and Cathay, in caravels traveling down the western shore of Africa. Their patron was the remarkable Prince Henry ("the Navigator")—whose portrait appears in the life-size *St. Vincent* altar panel by Nuno Gonçalves. This is the most famous Portuguese painting of all time, normally kept in Lisbon. Prince Henry is shown standing behind his nephew, the king Dom Alfonso V, and the prince, the future Dom João II, and behind them a kind of "Greek chorus" of

contemporary faces. On the left side of St. Vincent are portrayed Alfonso's queen, and behind her, Henry's sister Dona Isabel, shown in widow's garb as a Franciscan nun. Isabel's presence "focuses attention on the historic role of the House of Avis [the royal family] in the pursuit of navigation and conquest and on its international policies, which led to her marriage to Philip the Good of Burgundy," the catalog reports.

Painted ca. 1471-81, the picture combines the style of the great Flemish masters of the era with the distinctly Italian habit of including contemporary figures in a "unique combination of the religious and worldly," as the catalog puts it. St. Vincent, like Saints Stephen and Lawrence—depicted in the justly famous Chapel of Nicholas V in the Vatican a few years earlier—was a deacon saint, whose role in church economic affairs expresses the link between the sacred and secular domains.

Portugal's monarchs later rebuffed Columbus, confident after Bartolomeu Dias circumnavigated the Cape of Good Hope in 1488 that their route to the Indies around Africa would prove better than sailing west. Yet their share in the New World is reflected in a unique picture of the *Adoration of the Magi*. One of the Three Kings is shown, not as an African which was normal in European painting at the time, but as a Tupinamba Indian from Brazil; and the kneeling, European-looking king seems to be a portrait of Portugal's Admiral Cabral, who discovered Brazil.

Since the Portuguese colonized Africa, the issue arises of the black slave trade. While Henry did not stop the slave-taking practices of his captains, he never encouraged the slave trade, and he acted to have the bulk of the slaves sold in Lagos converted and given decent conditions. With each boat sent out in the 1430s, he issued pressing instructions for natives of the newly discovered regions to be brought back to Portugal to be trained as translators and guides for the next voyages, to provide intelligence on their homelands, and to be taught Christianity. *EIR* researcher Tim Rush reports, too, that the numbers of slaves brought to Portugal during Henry's lifetime were relatively few, both in absolute numbers and in relation to the thriving slave trade being practiced by Arab traders over the Sahara, Arab traders across the Indian Ocean, and Venetians operating from the Black Sea area. Indeed, there is strong reason to suspect the Venetian hand in the ugly turn which Portuguese relations with west Africa took in the 16th century. According to the catalog's account, the king of the Kongo was willing to lead his people toward Christianity but this was sabotaged by the greed of the slave traders.

In the "1492" exhibit, the Owo, Edo, and Benin cultures from what is today Nigeria, reflect a high level of naturalism in representing the human figure. These societies produced a high population density, and were making this art, which bespeaks the value of the human individual, many centuries before the Europeans arrived. The "primitivism" of African art made in these same regions, is actually a degeneration

that took place in the wake of the demoralization caused by the slave trade, not an "original" trait.

The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella

In the Spanish galleries of the "1492" show, three currents are richly interwoven to form a unique national culture. One is the heritage of the Jews and Muslim Arabs, who contributed scientific and technical knowledge, architectural forms, and numerous words to the classical Spanish language. The second is the art, music, and technology of the Low Countries, the cities of the Rhine Valley in northern Germany, and their trading partners in the Hanseatic cities along the Baltic Sea. The third is the impact of the Florence-centered Italian Renaissance. When we look at the art produced in the Americas in the 16th century by the evangelizers and their converts, all of these currents are present.

Thus, the exhibit includes precious objects such as a lusterware Passover Plate made in Spain around 1480, probably by Moorish (Muslim) artists working for a Jewish merchant; and a magnificently tooled leather shield (*adarga*) from Granada before 1492, of a type prized by Christians as well as Muslims.

Isabella of Castile, who unified her kingdom with Aragon to form Spain by her marriage to Ferdinand in 1474, preferred Flemish artists. Two of them, Juan de Flandes ("John of Flanders") and the Bruges-trained native of what is now Estonia, Michel Sittow, collaborated in a miniature altarpiece of the Life of Christ and the Life of the Virgin. Two panels from this altar, one of which includes portraits of Ferdinand and Isabella, are in the exhibit; two others, catalogued as part of the show, are hanging in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Art. The four pictures—of a total of 28 surviving—reveal a noble and delicate perfection which was a surprise to this reviewer, combining the skill of the artists and their unusually cosmopolitan cultural background. The "Catholic Monarchs" gallery contains many other breathtaking surprises, like the suit of armor made for Prince (later Emperor) Charles in Nuremberg, the well-preserved "golden" tapestry of the Coronation of the Virgin, and sculptures and book illustrations by great artists who came to Spain from northern Europe.

"Circa 1492" would be valuable for the tapestries alone, which would otherwise never be seen together. In an era when textiles were *the* heavy industry, tapestries epitomized the marriage of art and technology and of international commercial exchanges. Woven exclusively by skilled craftsmen, in the Franco-Flemish domains around Brussels, Arras, and Tournai, the subjects and often the designs were provided by artists from southern Europe, and the wool often came from Spain.

Alonso Berruguete's *Sacrifice of Abraham*, a work "Italian" in its mastery of the nude human figure, yet with the Germanic-Flemish emotional intensity that had become a part of Iberian art, has been cited by one "New Age" reviewer as an example of the idea that brutality and violence were

universal in the era. The lesson is just the opposite. The subject portrays the incident which divided Abraham from the ancient Near Eastern traditions of human sacrifice, and instituted the Jewish reverence for human life which continued in Christianity. Since the freeing of Mexico from the Aztecs had just been completed in 1521 and the evangelization was under way, the subject of Abraham's hand being stayed from sacrificing his child Isaac at the last moment by an angel of God, had special meaning in 1526 when this piece was carved. Spanish missionaries were confronting the task of winning the indigenous people of the New World away from a religion of human sacrifice, polygamy, hallucinogens, and slave labor.

Berruguete's statue also recalled the distinction between Judeo-Christian morality and the version of "Islam" practiced by the Ottoman Turks, whose military threat to Europe and control over the spice routes to the Indies were a strong motivation for Columbus's voyage. It was Ottoman practice, for example, to slaughter all the brothers of the Sultan to prevent a battle for succession.

Renaissance city-building in the New World

Jonathan Brown's essay in the catalog reports: "The arrival—or outbreak as it has been suggestively called—of the Renaissance in Spain is an extraordinary phenomenon. In central Italy the Renaissance evolved over time from a body of theoretical concepts; in Spain the Renaissance arrived in wooden crates." The important noble family of the Mendoza, several of whose scions spent extensive periods of time in Italy, were among the principal sponsors of this importation and among the great European art patrons of the 15th century. They were the patrons of a "Man of Sorrows" sculpture by Diego de Siloe, which sums up the dramatic change in Spanish art. A work of ca. 1522, thoroughly imbued with Italian classical notions of beauty, it was made by the son of a Netherlandish sculptor, Gil de Siloe, whose very different work of around 1492 can be compared in the same room.

The "Circa 1492" catalogue does not mention this, but we must underline that it was the same Mendoza family which proceeded to "re-export" the Italian Renaissance into the New World, not in crates, but through ideas.

As developed by essayists Donna Pierce and Jorge Manrique in the catalog for *Mexico: Splendors of 30 Centuries*, during the 1530s, three men came to power whose impact on Mexico is of world-historical significance: Bishop Fray Juan de Zumárraga, Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza, and Judge Vasco de Quiroga. These men shared a vision of implementing the ideals of Christian Renaissance philosophy in the New World. They were prepared to put to the test the premise that every human individual is created in the living image of God, with the potential for creativity known as the "divine spark of reason." They had close connections to such leading Christian humanists as Erasmus of Rotterdam, St. Thomas More in England, the Platonic Academy of Florence, and

Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, the confessor of Queen Isabel the Catholic of Spain. (Cisneros's magnificent "Rich Missal" in the Washington show is an example of his patronage.)

In short, these Mexican "founding fathers" were the emissaries of the civilization recorded in the "Circa 1492" show. One of their close collaborators, Pedro de Gante, who arrived in Mexico in 1522, instructed the children of the Indians in European perspective and proportion, and taught them the musical polyphony of his native Flanders. He had been trained by the Brothers of the Common Life, the primary lay institution involved in spreading Christian humanism in northern Europe.

Antonio de Mendoza, New Spain's first viceroy (1535-50) and a descendant of the Mendozas who brought the Italian Renaissance to Spain, brought to Mexico the *Ten Books on Architecture* of the Florentine architect Leon Battista Alberti. Alberti had developed star-shaped and rectangular grid designs for ideal cities, based on the concept that cities as well as individual buildings must reflect the harmonic ordering of God's universe. But in Europe, the old cities were already built up in the haphazard and fortified manner of the Middle Ages. What might have been considered utopian in Europe could become a reality, if only briefly, on the new continent.

Viceroy Mendoza overlaid the Albertian grid plan on the preexisting, unfortified Indian cities, starting with Mexico City itself, where Cortés had boldly begun building a great city over the Aztec capital. The streets were widened and regulated, and oriented to optimum ventilation and sunlight, and the plaza was enlarged to a rectangle twice as long as wide, following Alberti's formula. "The unfortified town with its monumental plaza and wide straight streets became a source of amazement to European visitors, and was reproduced all over Latin America. Mendoza worked closely with the Franciscan and Augustinian friars to develop a so-called moderate plan for the religious establishments of Mexico, probably also based on the Renaissance formulas of Alberti," Pierce observes.

At most, there were a few hundred friars, yet by 1540, Pierce writes, there were approximately 50 establishments, and 20 years later, almost 100. In fact, almost all of Mexico's cities today, were built in the first 80 years after the conquest. The few capable journeymen who crossed the Atlantic in the early 16th century "taught small groups of Indians, who then covered the territory in traveling teams," writes Jorge Alberto Manrique of the National Autonomous University of Mexico in an essay in the *Mexico* catalog. "On each project they instructed the local populace and supervised the work. This explains the recurrence of similar solutions in widely separated places, as well as the application of methods that required little specialization, such as the cylindrical columns of the cloisters, all with the same bases and capitals. It was a kind of assembly-line construction that answered the need for speed."

To be continued.